

# Bulletin 2

# CARAVAN



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## "Days of the Euro-Arab Cinema"

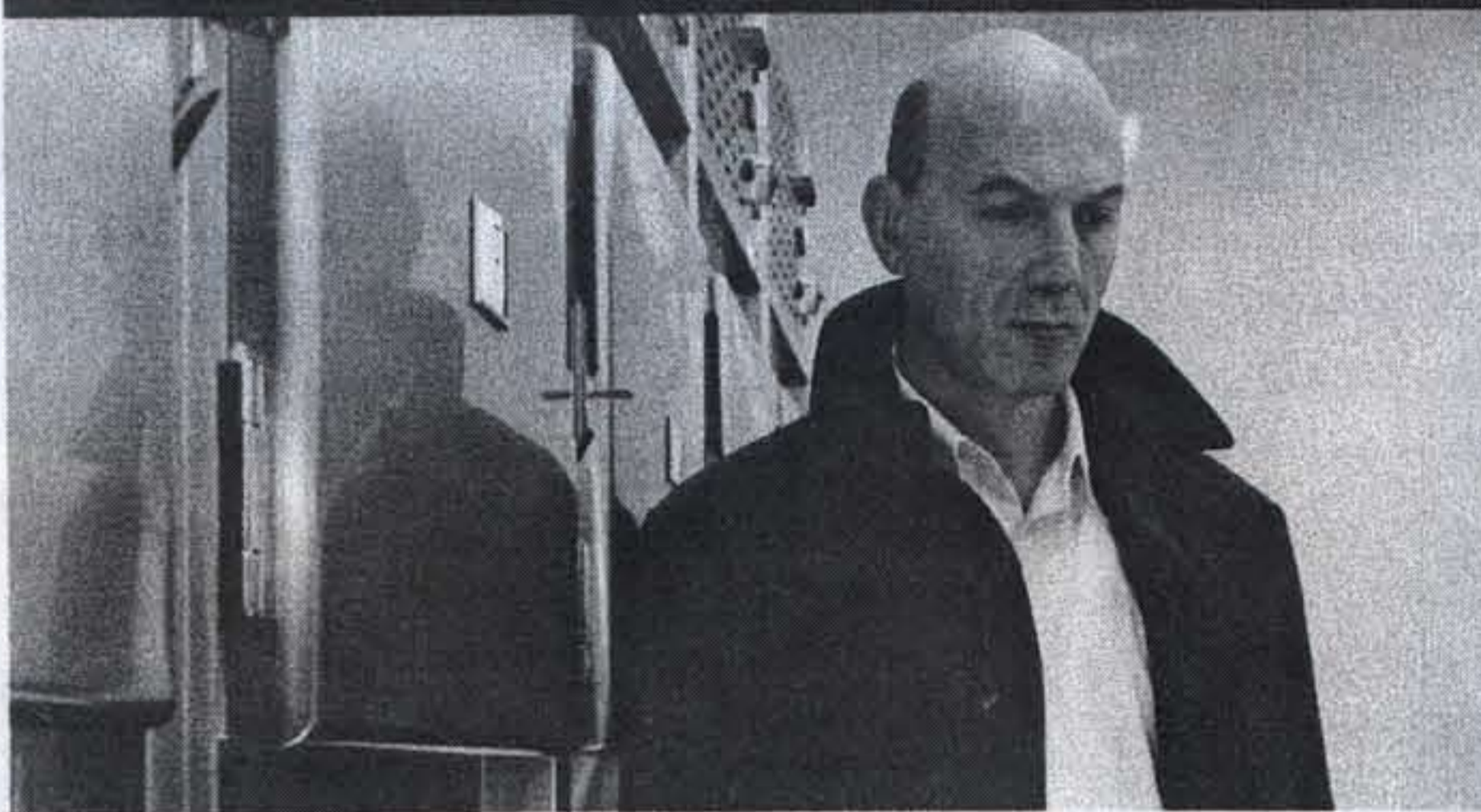
4-10 April 2007

Ibdaa Creativity Center

مركز الإبداع بالقاهرة

■ 5 - April 2007 ■

## The Last Man



### Credits

France/ Lebanon, 2006, Color, 101 minutes  
Director & Scripwriter: Ghassan Salhab  
Cast: Carlos Chahine, Zeina Layoun, Abla Khoury, Aouni Kawas, Fayek Hmaissé, Fadi Abi Samra, May Sahab  
D.O.P: Jacques Bouquin  
Sound: Patrick Allex  
Music Composer: Cynthia Zaven  
Production Designer: Helen Boyce  
Editor: Michèle Tyan  
Mix: Florent Lavallée  
Choreographer: Israel Galvan  
Associate Production Company: Agat Films & Cie  
Associate Producer: Nicolas Blanc

### Festivals

Locarno International Film Festival, Switzerland  
Beirut Cinema Days, Lebanon  
Festival international du cinéma de Montpellier, France  
Dubai International Film Festival, UAE  
Sydney Arab Film Festival, Australia  
Singapore Film Festival, Singapore  
TRIBECA Film Festival, New York

### Ghassan Salhab

Director & Scripwriter  
Born on May 4th, 1958, in Dakar, Senegal. Apart from his own films as director, Ghassan Salhab has worked on a number of screenplays in Lebanon and in France. He teaches at the ALBA (Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts) and at the USEK (Université Saint Esprit of Kaslik) in Lebanon and has also written a number of articles that have appeared in specialized periodicals.

### Notes about the film

A process of transformation, an irreversible process, is underway at the heart of a city that is itself undergoing considerable change. Beirut, the cinematographic realm, the central body of nearly all my films since my first feature, *Beyrouth Fantôme*; Beirut where a slight fissure threatens to become a gaping abyss; Beirut where things are continuously being done and undone, to quote Samuel Beckett.

Khalil is perhaps a metaphor for Beirut, but he is above all a product of the city. He is a child of Beirut. We could even say that Beirut, a mutant city, has given birth to a mutant. But isn't it intrinsic to any large metropolis to create all kinds of mutants? All these passers by, all these strangers, even ourselves, aren't we also product mutants? Beneath the blanket of social order,

every great city hides its monsters as best as it can; monsters that often hide from themselves. They don't all necessarily live hidden in the shadows. A mutant doesn't necessarily know that he's a mutant. The fact that the social order has been upturned more than once in Beirut's recent history only facilitates the emergence of all sorts of mutants.

I have directly borrowed from the vampire myth of the man who is no longer entirely human (unless he is in fact too human since he feeds on the blood of his fellow men). He is neither truly alive, nor truly dead: He is 'undead'. A sort of ghost. And, in Beirut, there are a lot of ghosts. Ghosts of the past and ghosts of the

present.

Progressively and irremediably, a man drifts away from his human condition, vanishes from the social world, becomes a ghost, a shadow that even the mirror no longer reflects. It is a process, a pathway marked by solitude that dramatically changes this man's life, casting him, along with the entire film, into the night & its darkness.

Ghassan Salhab

### Ghassan Salhab's vampire...

It would be futile to look for common points between Ghassan Salhab's vampire and Bram Stoker's character. Let us simply say that in general, cinematic works on the theme of Dracula portray vampires caught up in the struggle between good and evil. This struggle is based on a fictional work inspired by a supposedly real historical character, and that presents the vampire as an immortal being gifted with eternal life as long as he avoids daylight and spends nights seeking out victims to quench his thirst for blood until the dawn of a new day. Divine justice will only triumph in the end if believers are illuminated within their souls and determined to thwart the vampire. The vampire hunters go about their task as if it were a "mission prescribed by divine law", according to an expression commonly used in Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut, places from which the blood and the soul are currently being drained...

Having said that, Ghassan Salhab's film goes beyond the story of Dracula and its different versions, taking the idea much further. It dives, but only in the figurative sense, into the secret mazes of Nosferatu's soul. He is another kind of vampire introduced to audiences by director F. W. Murnau during the expressionist period of German silent cinema, personifying the feelings and ideas of a time, and not as a legendary figure defeated by holiness or religiosity.

Indeed, it was at the start of the early 1920's, when the world was racked by economic crises and social problems caused by the end of the First World War, that "Nosferatu" was created, among other similar cinematic characters such as "Doctor Caligari" from German director Robert Wiene and Fritz Lang's "Doctor Mabuse". These are films whose main characters arouse fear and terror because of their pathological obsession with death, power and the oppression of people already drowned in suffering and sorrow.

This same obsession is implicit in Beirut's social climate. Even though Salhab's film and the era during which he is working are different from those of the

films referred to above, the filmmaker has based his main character on the tradition of "ill" doctors. Doctor Khalil Chams, which is the main character's name, has a hobby: scuba diving. His contamination by the vampires begins with sudden physical fits that lead him to close in on himself and withdraw slowly into a world of silence. His confrontation with the vampire who is at large in Beirut is in fact a confrontation with himself, with his memories and with his relationship to passing time, and it takes on a dual dimension, possibly because of the linguistic turn of his surname, "Chams", a term meaning sun. The sun is the vampire's enemy because its light proves fatal to him. Khalil is therefore his own enemy. In his soul, there is no salvation for him; simply a hell that stirs and swells until the moment when, looking at himself in the mirror, he experiences his own disintegration when his image is no longer reflected. Ghassan Salhab has chosen to deviate from the "Prince of Darkness" prototype and has avoided presenting his character as a creature of the night, allowing day and night to unite in his world; to feed off each other and transmute into unbearable suffering which eventually takes over Khalil's body and settles in every fibre of his being. Little by little, Doctor Khalil renounces the magic of love and desire. For the tragedy of vampires is that they can only feel or express emotion through their eyes. Just as sunlight leads to their death if ever they look straight at it, beauty fatally attracts them, unleashing their impulses and murderous desires.

Vampires carry the curse of their gaze within them. One look is enough to inflame and exacerbate their victims' desires. For Khalil Chams, the suffering that he endures arises from the curse of the gaze which empties Khalil of all desire. This causes him to renounce all pleasures, including sexual pleasure, and to deny everything that he was before. As a result, the lack of any quest for pleasure makes him an "asexual" being, and the prefix "a" that negates the term that it is attached to, symbolically returns Khalil to the start of things - "a" being the first letter of the alphabet. But this beginning is that of negation and not that of being or existence.

Khalil Chams' world does not resemble that of vampires. Their world is made up of blackness while his is entirely white. They are the living dead; he is unable to decide between life and death. He knows the coldness of the sea's water and that of the rain; but he feels only a sensation of cold, and sees nothing but refrigerators as far as the eye can see: His refrigerator at home filled with pieces of red meat, the hospital morgue packed with corpses of the victims of Beirut's mysterious killer... The city is walled up in silence; the silence that people cloak themselves in because they cannot defy the taboo, but which is sometimes broken by a dance or a song and by the revelation of oneself in the mirror (May Sahab singing in front of the mirror, just before she puts her veil on).

But the resistance to the rhythm of the music, dancing and pouring rain doesn't ease the jaws of silence that threaten to clamp shut for good. Khalil is perhaps the last mortal. Indeed, the film's English title "The Last Man", grants him the honour of being "the last man", while the Arabic title "Atlat" or Ruins, leads him into the "ruins" of his city and no more. Therefore, I wonder whether it might not be more appropriate to call the film "The Ruins of the Last Man" in order to indicate the city of Khalil or the Beirut of Khalil. For, just as Khalil follows his own descent into hell and moves towards death throughout the film, in the end we witness the disappearance of the film (in the audience's eyes) and a confrontation with the mirror in which Khalil Chams is unable to see his reflection.

In Ghassan Salhab's cinema, we do not simply watch a film; we embark on a journey of meditation into the world of silence and mirrors of the soul.

Mohamed Soueid  
Filmmaker and critic